

Museum News: History of Brands in Terrell County

By C. W. (Bill) Smith, curator

Terrell County Memorial Museum

We live in one of the most romanticized areas of the world...the land of cowboys and vast cattle empires. Of course, those of us who live here realize that it isn't all about the cows. Sheep and goats played a more prominent role in our local history than cattle, but Dryden, just 20 miles to the east, for years was the largest shipping point for cattle on the whole border. The huge cattle ranches in Mexico often drove their herds up to the Shafter Crossing of the Rio Grande and brought them up to the stockyards at Dryden for shipment to all parts of the world. The huge Pecos Land and Cattle Company also called Dryden its headquarters and shipped thousands of animals through the early years, so Terrell County could be called a cattleman's and sheepman's paradise. And, unlike other areas of the west, the two groups got along just fine.

But, as always, there were other problems for the livestock men. Rustling, or stealing, livestock was and is a big problem. Each animal represents a valuable investment and the only way to determine ownership of an animal was to examine its brand. All livestockmen mark their animals with a personalized brand, which most animals receive early in their lives. In this modern age, animals have their ID information tattooed on the inside of the mouth, written on plastic or metal clips fastened to the animal's ear or embedded electronic chips injected under the skin containing the owner's information. Since the

most valuable part of the sheep is its wool, sheep are given a paint brand that is administered after shearing, and which has to be redone each year.

But, the time honored tradition of livestockmen around the world is to use either a fire brand administered with a red hot iron, or in this day, a freeze brand using liquid nitrogen or some other super coolant (Steve Hill, *The Tulia Herald* January 9, 1992.) Freeze branding was instigated by animal rights activists who claimed it was less painful and therefore more humane than burning the brand into the flesh. Scientific tests have shown, however, that freeze branding is only slightly less painful than fire branding, and the pain lasts for a longer period.

However it is administered, the world of livestock brands is a fascinating place. The brand, in effect, becomes a legal document of ownership, and to alter a brand is a highly punishable offence, like forging someone's name or passing counterfeit currency.

Virtually every county in the US maintains brand books at the county level to keep track of brands in their district. In Texas, the County Clerk maintains the registration of brands and requires reregistration every five years.

According to an article in the *Seguin Gazette-Enterprise* (Seguin, Texas, December 29, 1993) there are four types of branding irons...blot irons, running irons, stamp irons and paint irons. The blot iron is a flat piece of metal attached to an iron shaft and is used to "blot" out an existing brand. When branded animals were bought the old brand was blotted out and the new owner's brand applied below. Blot irons are dangerous and can cause a nasty wound that is slow in healing. Some animals have died at the use of blot irons. Eventually, stockmen began to strike a slash over the old brand, placing the new brand below. The animal healed much faster using this method.

The second type, the running iron, is illegal to use because they are the chief tool of rustlers. The end of the running iron is bent into an L-shape and the rustler literally can "write" with that end, enabling him to forge almost any brand. Other objects can be used as running irons, such as cinch rings and even fire poker.

Stamp irons are the third type and they have a design on the end, made up of letters and/or numbers or simple pictures. This is what we think of when someone says "branding iron." Before about 1880 ranchers used figures or,



Photo: Andreas Praefcke

simple pictures, almost exclusively. After that they began to use letters and numbers, sometimes combined with figures.

The fourth kind of brand, the paint brand, is used when the hide, hair or wool is too valuable to damage by burning. In this case, the brand is dipped into paint and stamped onto the freshly-shorn animal's side. This eventually wears off and must be reapplied yearly.

The history of brands in Terrell County is a very interesting one. Brands in Terrell County consist of figures, letters and/or numbers. In the following chart, the earliest brands registered in the Terrell County area are listed first. Figural brands are listed next and then letters and numbers used for personal brands.

Name	Brand	Symbol	Year
J. D. Houston	NA	NA	1880
Pecos Land & Cattle Co.	Swinging H		1884
John Camp	KL	KL	1885
Reuben Mussey	Flying V		1885
John H. Reagen	(double fork)		1886
S. A. Purinton	P Bar		1886
Independent Cattle Co.	Cross L		1887
Dull Brothers	anchor		
D. Hart	heart		
W. J. Carpenter	booger D		
Gatlin & Anderson	pitchfork		
Lee Grigsby	triangle		
R. H. Murrah	star		
F. W. Young	rocking chair Y		
R.C. Paxton	RCE	RCE	
Jesus Flores	JF	JF	
John McClain	72	72	
Charles Downie	YF Bar	YF;	
Cecil Arvin	PAK	PAK	
Ed Counts	TE	TE	

Chart symbols courtesy of Alice Evans Downie, *Terrell County Its Past Its People*